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SIPDIS

STATE For CA/VO/F/P:Tim Smith, Abby Rupp and Brenda Grewe; for
CA/P:Steve Royster; and for EUR: Ivan Weinstein

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Budapest's Public Outreach on Visa Waiver Program and ESTA

Ref: A) State 78375 B) State 118460

¶1. Summary: Embassy Budapest has engaged in active public and media outreach related to the Visa Waiver Program dating back to the commencement of the Roadmap process for Hungary, and redoubled efforts following the passage of the legislation last summer. Post seized upon the October 17 White House announcement on Visa Waiver Program (VWP) expansion and October 28 visit to Hungary of Secretary Chertoff to generate additional media attention and public interest in both our website information and public outreach events. As the November 17 effective date for Hungary's VWP admission approaches, Post is focused upon informing the public, travel industry, and other stakeholders on ESTA and other applicable requirements. End Summary.

¶2. Post conducted numerous interviews, media roundtables, public outreach, and webforums following the passage of legislation in summer 2006. As a result, key media outlets and key public constituencies were already well aware of the broad brush strokes of the ESTA system and of other key requirements for VWP travel. Often in media interviews, interviewers will feed ConOffs with questions on any key requirements that have been omitted inadvertently. We benefit greatly, therefore, from factually accurate reporting in print and broadcast media.

¶3. For the October 17 White House announcement, Post scheduled a reception, including significant media attendance, allowing guests to view the President's announcement virtually live by AETV feed. Fortunately, the Hungarian flag was directly behind the President's shoulder in the camera shot used for the announcement. The mood of our Hungarian guests at the event was euphoric, and the media coverage in the days following conveyed that fully to a wider public.

¶4. Coverage was similarly widespread and positive for the October 28 visit to Budapest by Secretary Chertoff. In the press conference at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Minister of Justice and Law Enforcement Tibor Draskovics and Senior State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Marta Fekszsi, Dr. Fekszsi provided a detailed explanation of ESTA using screen shots of the actual ESTA site and illustrating the difference between the newer Hungarian e-passport and its precursor. Local media coverage following the event included several accurate, detailed explanations of the system.

¶5. Post also sought to update the Embassy website with early and comprehensive guidance on the changes, especially in view of the current lack of a Hungarian-language version of the ESTA website. Immediately following Secretary Chertoff's press conference, we posted a one-page explanation in both English and Hungarian of travel under the VWP, the requirement for an ESTA authorization, and how to tell a Hungarian e-passport from the older version. At the same time, we posted an informal Hungarian translation of the ESTA screens to assist travelers in navigating the website and completing the form, along with a Hungarian translation of the ESTA help pages.

When we later received the VWP checklist from <http://www.travel.state.gov/pdf/VWP-QUICKREF.pdf>, we translated that

as well and made it available immediately at our website.

¶6. In the two weeks leading up to November 17, Post either has completed or will complete the following outreach events:

October 20, live interview by ConOff on HirTV.

October 28, press conference with Secretary Chertoff and Hungarian counterparts. Thirty media representatives were in attendance and the event was widely covered.

November 4, Information Table at the AmCham Election Night event attended by nearly 2500 guests.

November 5, outreach to local travel agents at the American Corner in Debrecen. Eleven attendees.

November 6, outreach to public and local travel agents at the American Corner in Pecs. Fifteen attendees.

November 6, live interview by Consular Section Chief on Duna Television.

November 7, ESTA briefing for Budapest travel agents. Twenty-five attendees.

November 10, outreach to public and local travel agents at the American Corner in Eger.

November 12, outreach to public and local travel agents at the American Corner in Veszprem.

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November 12, ConOff will answer questions live as part of a call-in program on Magyar Radio.

November 13, ESTA and VWP briefing for airline personnel.

November 13, Webforum to answer questions from general public.

Post anticipates that additional press interviews are likely to materialize as well during this time and in the days following November 17. Also, both the Public Affairs and Consular Sections are fielding also a steady stream of telephone, e-mail and other inquiries from the public and media.

¶7. In routine inquiries from the public, questions from the press, and even in discussions with government interlocutors, Post frequently receives specific technical questions that are not addressed or answered at the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website or in any of the materials or guidance received from Washington. Although Post has been able in several cases to obtain informal guidance by e-mail from contacts in DHS or CA, Post urges that significantly more practical public guidance be made available about ESTA and about how it operates, both at the time a traveler applies for authorization and at the time he or she applies for admission to the United States. Likewise, there needs to be guidance available on the role and responsibilities of airlines, and this guidance must be available for the majority of Posts like Budapest at which there is no CBP presence.

¶8. Specifically, Post is receiving inquiries, including Congressional correspondence, regarding travel under the Visa Waiver Program by applicants refused under INA Section 214(b), often at the interview window seconds after the refusal. Many of these applicants continue to closely resemble intending immigrants. The Hungarian public and their visitors in the United States appear to assume that these refusals will impact the individual's eligibility for ESTA, contrary to Post's understanding. While we wait for more formal guidance, Post continues to refer people to the VWP checklist (see para 5), which implies through omission that previous refusals will not impact eligibility. Post would, nonetheless, welcome clear guidance that will assist these applicants in making their travel plans. If Post's understanding is correct that 214(b) refusals will not be considered in ESTA, how will these factors be considered at

Ports of Entry with respect to INA Section 212(a)(7)(A)?

¶9. Lastly, it would be very helpful to Posts if DHS or CBP would designate a "help desk" contact for Posts' questions or technical issues involving ESTA and VWP. For all practical purposes, consular sections overseas function as the only available customer support for foreign language inquiries, and need a streamlined procedure for requesting authoritative answers to questions from the traveling public. A separate information contact for questions from the public, however, would also be extremely helpful for at least the English-speaking public. The "Ask a question" function at the CBP website is unfortunately somewhat unwieldy and also possesses an overly-long URL that can not be easily pasted into an e-mail or quoted in a media interview. As we understand, the ESTASupport@dhs.gov e-mail address is for systems-related technical problems only.

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